An abstract graphic design on the left side of the cover. It features several vertical black lines of varying lengths. A thick, horizontal blue brushstroke crosses these lines. Below the horizontal stroke, there are two curved blue lines that sweep upwards and to the right, resembling a stylized 'C' or a protective shield. The overall composition is minimalist and modern.

# **SOCIAL ACTION**

**THE CHRISTIAN FAITH  
AND PUBLIC OPINION**

**Christian Community**

# SOCIAL ACTION

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## CONTENTS

The Christian Faith and Public Opinion	1
The Role of Public Opinion in a Responsible Society	3
The Communicator: His Channels and His Values	7
The Public: Image and Reality	17
The Content of the Popular Press	25
The Effect of the Press on Public Opinion	32
Toward a Sound Public Opinion: Steps We Can Take	39
Discussion Questions	44
Sunday School of America	45
<i>Robert W. Lynn</i>	
Good Reading	47

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# The Christian Faith and Public Opinion

The dismissal of General MacArthur took the nation by surprise. "Who was right," millions of Christian laymen asked themselves, "MacArthur or the President?" They didn't wait long to find out. Within hours radio commentators and newspaper editors were interpreting the event.

The big opinion makers in America had just what they wanted, a dramatic public issue that could be dealt with in terms of personalities. Promptly and unanimously the Great Debate got top billing in the popular press, on the radio and TV. The war of words was on. Concluded the *New York Times* in a closely reasoned editorial: "We support Mr. Truman's action." Hearst's *Daily Mirror* cried: "The greatest American general of our day, Douglas MacArthur, has been dismissed to please the cupidity of Great Britain, the ignorance of Dean Acheson, the jealousy of General George Marshall."

If we are to accept the conclusions of dozens of studies of the process by which most of us make up our minds on public issues, the "average" Protestant layman probably made his decision quickly, accepting with little question the viewpoint of his favorite commentator. After his mind was "made up" he didn't have to bother with the flood of words from the Senate Hearings on America's Far East policy. He wanted to escape from the complicated decisions the politicians in Washington had to make about far-away places. "After all," he said, "my opinion wouldn't make any difference. And, anyhow, I have enough trouble trying to make my pay check keep up with increasing prices."

The laymen who did want to think through the MacArthur business, who sought to develop a Christian interpretation of the affair, found their resources highly limited. Vague exhorta-

tions to honesty, peace, and brotherhood heard so often from the pulpit did not help much on such a concrete and complex issue. No Protestant group in the church, which by its recognized competency in politics and knowledge of the Christian faith commanded the attention of the public, spoke to the policy issues involved in the MacArthur controversy. And no such group spoke to the press as to the type of coverage of the controversy which would meet the standards of responsible communication. It was a rare Protestant publication or radio program which sought to attempt to give guidance on the specific policy questions involved, even though the Protestant press generally had found "moral issues" involved in such subjects as liquor, gambling, or the appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican.

A few churchmen did speak out on the MacArthur controversy. *The Christian Century* supported the dismissal of MacArthur. One West Coast pastor-editor outdid the MacArthur worship of the Hearst press and Henry Luce's *Time* and *Life*. He urged 5 million Americans to join his "cordon of prayer" based on this pledge: "Believing in God, believing in the dedicated spiritual idealism of General MacArthur, and believing in the power of prayer, I hereby covenant to pray daily for God's blessing on General MacArthur." Several months

This is the fourth issue of the *Social Action* magazine series on "Christian Community" seeking to describe the relation of the Gospel of Christ to American politics, economics, public opinion, foreign policy, and the Protestant church. The major writing of this issue on public opinion was done by Ernest Lefever, recently appointed associate executive director of the Department of International Justice and Goodwill of the National Council of Churches. Some of the material for the issue was developed in the "Religion and the American Press" course taught at Yale University Divinity School by Kenneth Underwood.

The other members of the group who are preparing the present *Social Action* series are Edwin Becker, Julian Hartt, James Laney, William Miller, William Muehl, and Herman Reissig.



later he said: "MacArthur's Cleveland speech (Sept. 6, 1951) almost belongs in the New Testament."

The difficulties of conscientious laymen in the MacArthur crisis raise basic questions about the responsibility of the Protestant churches for public opinion in America. If the Gospel has something to say about all human events, should not the church be concerned with the formation of a sound public opinion? Should not religious leaders seek to influence the forces which control the mass opinion-making channels? How can the church help make the radio, TV, and the press more responsible? Why has the church adopted uncritically many practices of the secular press, rather than developing standards of responsibility based on its historic Gospel? These questions must be faced in the light of our faith in a God who seeks to reconcile the whole world to Himself.

## THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OPINION IN A RESPONSIBLE SOCIETY

### *Public Opinion Is Crucial*

Without ceremony and with little preparation America has been thrown into the leading role in the world of nations. Our leaders are faced with decisions which mean freedom or tyranny, life or death for millions of persons. Faced with these momentous problems, our policy makers from the President on down need to know, more than ever before, what the people of the United States think. Decisions made in the name of the people in a democracy must take seriously the will of the people. Public opinion provides the crucial context in which national policy decisions are made and carried out. If public opinion is not clearly expressed our leaders will be more vulnerable to the influence of the me-first pressure groups masquerading as defenders of the "American Way of Life."

Clearly expressed public opinion is only part of the story. If it is to be an effective guide to the decision-makers, public opinion must be informed and freely arrived at.

## *What Is Public Opinion?*

Public opinion is a central tendency, a direction, a general attitude held by members of a society toward an issue which concerns the whole community. It is dynamic, always moving toward a decision about concrete issues. Public opinion reveals the fundamental affirmations of a community about the meaning and direction of its life. It is not the mechanical sum of individual choices. It is never unanimous and it may not speak for the majority, but it does reflect the power relationships of a society being mobilized to act. On every issue there are several opinions striving to become *the* opinion, and competing for the loyalty of those who have not made up their minds. In this dynamic process a minority group may exert a greater influence in shaping the collective opinion than does an apathetic and less-vocal majority.

Public opinion on a given issue may be highly emotional or quite rational. It may represent minority interests or the general will. The quality of public opinion depends upon the level of discussion from which it emerges. This level, in turn, depends upon the degree to which the mass media of communication (newspapers, magazines, books, radio, TV, and movies) have permitted a full and fair discussion of all positions.

## *Public Opinion and Mass Communication*

Public opinion is the collective response of a community to an event demanding decision. It emerges from the interplay of *facts* about the event, *ideas* concerning it, and the *values* held by the public. As such, public opinion reflects the entire culture and all the influences within it from CIO-PAC to the Real Estate Lobby. It is molded especially by four dominant institutions—the school, the church, special interest groups, and the mass press.<sup>1</sup> Of these, the press is probably the most powerful in molding American opinion today. The mass media are more directly concerned with specific and current public issues than

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1. Whenever the word "press" is used it includes all the popular or mass communication media—newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, and movies.



either the church or the school. But most important, the popular press controls the complex and costly technical resources of our society for mass communication.

The press is not only the chief agency in the formation of public opinion. It is also a major vehicle, along with the political parties, pressure groups, and an economic system which permits consumer choice, through which the general will is made known to our national leaders.

### *The Protestant Churches and Public Opinion*

Our faith in God compels us to take the whole Gospel to the whole world. This means communication, witnessing to the truth before all men. We cannot confine our communication to the Sunday sermon and to our pitifully inadequate church press, which reach only part of the people. We must speak to the whole world. We must take seriously the mass press which does reach all the people.

The pressure upon the American press to increase circulation, to entertain, to advance the interests of commercial sponsors has, along with many other factors to be examined in this article, continually perverted the efforts by mass communicators to supply adequate meaning and motivation for audiences. Christians have a duty to seek to transform these media, to discern God's grace and man's sin within them. Their efforts will have their own partiality, a partiality to be redeemed constantly by a Gospel revealing the wholeness of God in Christ. The Protestant churches, in their dealing with the mass media, have too often insisted on a "religious" broadcast or a church page in the local newspaper. This insistence on getting more "religion" in the press has contributed to the separation of the Christian faith from the mainstream of life; it has added one more compartment to an already over-segmented press. Religion is vastly more than one of 21 departments in *Time* magazine.

Public opinion is one of the most neglected areas in the

Protestant churches. Our denominations have departments on evangelism, religious education, missions, social action and public relations, but there are no agencies dealing directly with the formation of opinion in the mass communications on public issues, the development of a Christian ethic for the mass media, and the use of the Protestant churches' educational resources to help communicators to discern their responsibilities. The National Council of Churches has departments on economics, religious liberty, promotion of various church programs, rural life, and world politics, but nothing on public opinion and the mass media. Efforts of the National Council and the denominations to get "religion" on the air, the screen, and TV, have little to do with the formation of public opinion on the concrete political questions facing every Christian.

This neglect of public opinion in church agencies reflects a failure at a deeper level. Protestant theologians and scholars have done practically no work in the field, while other professional groups have been dealing increasingly with it. The neglect of the church is eloquently illustrated by the complete absence of material on religion and mass communication in two recent source books.<sup>2</sup> In the forward of the text in communication prepared by the Institute of Communications Research of the University of Illinois, the work of "anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists, and media men," is acknowledged. In Berelson the contributions of "sociology, psychology, political science, history, economics, anthropology, law, journalism, librarianship," are mentioned. One exception to this Protestant blindspot is the participation of Reinhold Niebuhr in the Commission on Freedom of the Press from 1943 to 1946.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Wilbur Schramm, ed. *Mass Communications*, a book of readings selected and edited for the Institute of Communications Research in the University of Illinois, Urbana: University of Illinois, 1949. Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz, editors, *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1950.

3. See *A Free and Responsible Press*, the report of the Commission. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947.



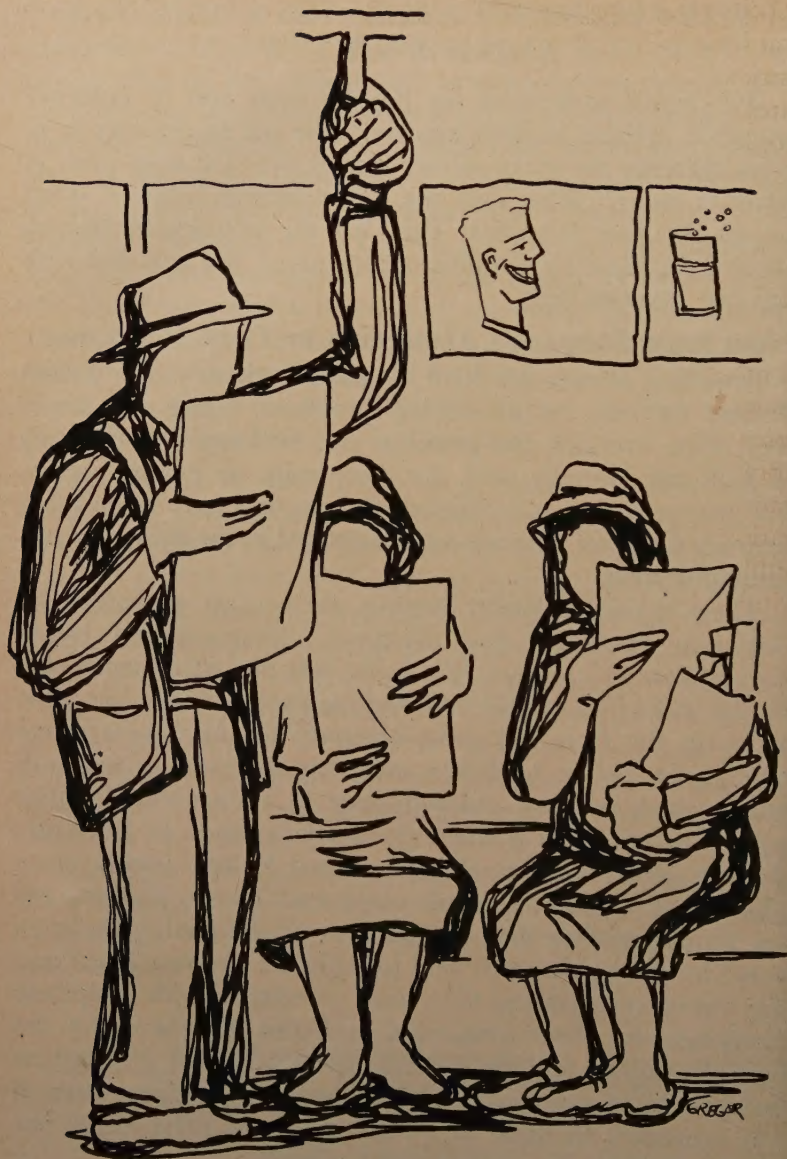
## THE COMMUNICATOR: HIS CHANNELS AND HIS VALUES

We cannot understand the popular press and its influence on public opinion without knowing who the communicator is. Who exercises the major, direct control over the mass press in America today? What does the communicator believe? What are his motives? His aims? How has the technical revolution affected the channels of public information? We will deal with this last question first.

### *From POOR RICHARD'S ALMANACK to TIME Magazine*

American orators are fond of going back to the Founding Fathers for help on present-day problems. Using this device they often overlook the yawning gulf between the simplicity of Colonial America and the complexity of today's society. The vast technical and political changes that have taken place between then and now are well illustrated in the field of public communication.

There is one similarity between the periods symbolized by Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack* and Henry Luce's *Time* and *Life*—a firm belief that our government rests on the will of the people and that the people should have free access to the facts and ideas necessary for forming a sound opinion on public questions, and that the press is a fourth estate which operates independently as an agency of public enlightenment. That is where the similarity ends. In Franklin's day the press consisted of hand-printed leaflets, papers, pamphlets, and books. Few people could read. Due to property and sex restrictions less than six per cent of the adult population voted for the conventions held to ratify the Constitution. Printing was inexpensive and there were newspapers with competing viewpoints for those who could read. But the real forum for both the literate and the illiterate was the market place where public opinion was fashioned and the town meeting where it was expressed. In those days freedom of the press meant one thing—freedom from government control.





Today 97.3 per cent of Americans over ten years can read, or at least look at pictures. Everyone over 21 years (except those restricted by the poll tax and other quasi-legal devices in certain states) can vote. All but a tiny fraction of our 150 million people are reached by the mass press which has become a complex and sprawling industry. Americans own 75 million radios, one for every two persons, and more than 14 million TV receivers, with the number increasing rapidly. The transition from Franklin's hand press in Philadelphia to trans-continental TV represents a vast communications revolution.

The enormously increased range, variety, speed, and vividness of modern communication have made the press the undisputed leader in molding public opinion. Consider the present and potential effects of an unfinished revolution, including advances from FM and TV in millions of homes to multiple-address transmission (device for distributing news by wireless from one station to many receivers simultaneously) and four-color facsimile transmission (device for sending words and pictures by wireless instantaneously half way around the earth).

This amazing technical progress with its increased efficiency is of itself neither good nor bad. These inventions can be used by dictators to enforce tyranny, by advertisers to sell corn flakes, or by statesmen to promote justice.

### *Increasing Centralized Control of the Press*

With the increase in the variety of channels open to the American press there has come a decrease in the number of units organized to own and to control the channels. Mass communication today, like public utilities, tends to be a natural monopoly. The press is big business and requires tremendous capital investment. It is estimated that it would cost from five to ten million dollars to launch successfully a metropolitan daily. Modern technology favors centralized control and ownership.

The Commission on Freedom of the Press has documented this increasing concentration of mass media.<sup>4</sup> Our largest cities

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4. *op. cit.* *A Free and Responsible Press*, pages 36-51.

have three or four daily papers each, smaller cities may have two, but most places have only one. In 1909 there were 2,600 dailies, in 1946 there were only 1,750. Of the cities having daily newspapers, only one out of 12 has competing dailies. Forty per cent of the estimated daily newspaper circulation of 48 million is non-competitive. News-gathering is concentrated in three big press associations, AP, UP, and INS. Features (pictures, comics, columns, and even canned editorials) are supplied by giant syndicates. National, regional, and local chains control 53.8 per cent of the total newspaper circulation in the United States.

This pattern of centralized ownership and control prevails in the other mass media, particularly in the magazine field where the six top publishers dominate the market: Curtis, with *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Country Gentleman*, and *Holiday*; Time-Life, Inc., with *Time*, *Life*, *Fortune*, and *Architectural Forum*; Crowell-Colliers, with *Colliers*, *American*, and *Woman's Home Companion*; Hearst, with *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *House Beautiful*, and *Junior Bazaar*; McCall's, with *McCall's Magazine* and *Redbook*; and the biggest of them all, *Reader's Digest* with a domestic circulation of 9,500,000 and a foreign circulation of 6,000,000.

Radio is the only medium licensed by the federal government to operate in the "public interest." In 1946 nearly 800 of the thousand local stations were affiliated with one of the big four networks, NBC, CBS, ABC, or Mutual.<sup>5</sup> The new Liberty network, concentrating upon stations beamed to rural people, now has the largest number of affiliated stations.

Television is not a brand-new communications industry. It is a new and vivid medium built on the foundation of network radio and assisted reluctantly by Hollywood. Eight largest motion picture companies govern the industry from the inception of an idea for a picture through its distribution. They do this

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5. As of January 1, 1949, there were 1,912 AM, 700 FM, and 50 TV stations on the air. The number of TV stations has increased rapidly since this date.



by co-optatively chosen management groups largely responsible to banking and real estate interests. Government anti-trust suits breaking up monopoly of both production and exhibition aspects of the industry and the developing market in TV for low budget films have given some encouragement to small producers of films. American communications empires are increasing in which one owner controls media in several fields. At his peak the late William Randolph Hearst owned 26 newspapers, 13 magazines, 8 radio stations, a newsreel company, a leading feature syndicate, and one of the three press associations.

The power structure of mass communication in America is complicated. As Christians we accept it as a part of the whole world which God seeks to redeem. We must understand the facts of control in order to see where influence can be exerted for change. We must study the findings of political scientists and others who have explored the field. We cannot ignore either the technical advances or the power structure of the popular press without denying the faith we profess.

### *The Advertiser and His Influence*

Advertising is the life blood of American newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV. The popular press as we know it would collapse overnight if revenue from this source were withdrawn. The advertising man provides about 65 per cent of newspaper income. He provides a smaller percentage of magazine income, and the total income of radio and TV stations. In 1947 the advertiser's dollar going to the mass media was split this way: newspapers, 50 cents; magazines, 23 cents; and radio, 27 cents. By December, 1951, TV was already drawing more advertising revenue than sound radio.

No commercial channel of public information or entertainment (except movies) can escape the influence of the advertiser. The cynic may say, "He who pays the fiddler calls the tune." The advertiser influence is far more subtle than this implies. There are instances of direct advertiser pressure on a newspaper

or a magazine, but the stronger a publisher is financially the better he can resist pressure to determine the handling of specific issues or events. The role of advertising in determining the content of radio and TV is much greater. Here the big consumer industries—soaps, soups, cereals, drugs, cosmetics, cigarettes, confectionery, and gasoline, whose sponsors contribute 75 per cent of the total network income—plan program content directly through their advertising agencies for what the American people see and hear most of the time. One hundred forty-four companies are responsible for 99 per cent of all network advertising.

The indirect influence of the advertiser is also powerful. Frederic Wakeman in a sensitive novel<sup>6</sup> pictures the advertising man as a huckster with a station wagon instead of a pushcart. He is driven by one obsession—to sell, sell, sell. The promotional outlook of Wakeman's unreconstructed huckster has become the watchword of the mass communicator in America. He wants to sell his product, to increase his audience so he can sell more advertising. If he can sell more advertising he can budget a bigger "show" to bid for a larger circulation. His drive to sell overshadows his responsibility as a communicator of public information. The code of the huckster leads to oversimplification rather than sound analysis, entertainment rather than information, the sensational rather than the important, and the temporary rather than the permanent. The drive for more remunerative advertising accounts reinforces the trend toward greater centralized control and ownership. Concentration of control contributes to development of a standardized product with interchangeable parts.

### *The Values of the Key Communicators*

Because of the big business nature of mass communications and the comparatively large financial remunerations available in the industry, those who achieve top positions tend to reflect

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6. *The Hucksters*. New York: Rinehart and Co., 1946.



the values and ideas of upper-income people and a general "big business" political-economic orientation. They also are influenced by the various commercial pressures of the industry. The owners and top-level managers are of tremendous influence since they have major influence in the development of standards by which the performance of communicators in the lower echelons is evaluated for hiring, firing, and promoting.

If we look at the entire panorama of communicators within the staffs of the mass media—the editors, the writers, the producers, the admen—we see that they come from the subcultures within America, and have their outlook shaped in the groups and communities which shape also the listener and reader. They grew up among us, and reflect the manifold differences in thought, interest, and ethic of a variegated American citizenry. The stereotyped interpretation of "the Press" as monolithic and unbending, the instrument of forces with which we are in no way identified, is treacherous and absurd. The Communists and others have one such false interpretation, that the American press is a "tool of Wall Street." Widespread popular opinion has others, which end in the same attitude, "You can't believe anything you read or hear."

This cynical and indiscriminative opinion of the press is more than unintelligent; it is perverse. It reflects our desire to make demons out of those who have great influence, and to excuse ourselves from the difficult tasks of choosing and discriminating, thinking and interpreting. It reflects the characteristic human tendency, to load all the blame on someone else, not me. You can get an approving response from many American audiences with sneers at Hollywood and the movies, at the newspapers and mass magazines. But it is a rare day when we acknowledge that it is up to us to think and choose, and that the more unpleasant characteristics of the press stem not from some fundamental mendacity of the communicators but from the attitudes, opinions, and values of the culture in which they were reared and to which they communicate. In the large, the press tends to represent in quintessence (and some-

times in caricature) the most common interests and values of the American public: homely individualism, the material rewards of virtue, the prime value of youth, the silver lining in every cloud, the gentleness and dear-heartness of the people who live and love in my home town.

To be sure, large parts of the press, under the pressure to sell, fast and widely and often, and in the particularly chummy relationship to elite and upper-income groups, appeal to the most superficial values and interests, and distort the diversity and depth of American opinion. The communicators do have initiating power, and because of the mass and big business bases of their work, they do help to shape the culture toward the kind of outlook they most often represent. For example, studies show that four-fifths of the weekly and daily newspapers supported the Republican presidential candidates in the past four national elections. But the relationship between communicator and audience is not one way, and the communicator must shift with culture. The *Saturday Evening Post*, for example, found in the early thirties that it could not maintain its "leadership" or circulation unless its highly conservative politics moved more toward center.

The Christian faith places a stern judgment upon the class limitations of the press. Men cannot respond fully to the richness and complexity of God's world without a free access to the facts and values of the whole community. A middle-class press, like a middle-class church, cannot speak the whole truth because of its narrow loyalty to one segment of the community. The partial message of the majority press must be challenged and supplemented by the minority press—the voices of liberal, labor, Negro, and consumer groups. A strong minority press will be needed as long as the popular press closes its pages to a full and free discussion of all controversial issues.

Mass communicators are fond of appealing, as are all of us, to high-sounding symbols such as the Golden Rule, the Sermon on the Mount, justice, brotherhood, freedom, God. But the real meaning of these words is prostituted when used to advance



provincial and selfish ends. These positive symbols become a cloak of self-deception when communicators fail to recognize any authority or truth beyond their own. How can the press be made responsible to something beyond itself? Public ownership or extended government control is no solution; it is merely a restatement of the problem. The press, like the church, the school, and the government itself, must come to recognize the reality of a living God above the world and yet active within it and seeking to reconcile it unto Himself.

### *The Protestant Churches as Communicators*

With increasing world responsibility America needs more than ever the kind of communication which leads to constructive public opinion. We need communicators, first of all, who understand the Gospel in its breadth, society in its complexity, and how to relate eternal principles to specific problems. We need communicators, in the second place, who speak the language of modern man and who know how to use the mass techniques which we now have. We must confess that the Protestant churches have failed to develop both types of communicators. Our leaders too often preach a partial gospel. They have limited their witness too exclusively to methods of a pre-mass-communication era.

The Protestant churches have not taken seriously the mass techniques of communication. Our press (including religious education publications) is by the standards of modern communications a small and ineffective voice in America. It was not always so. Before the middle of the last century the church press played an important role in public affairs. It is estimated that in 1840 three-fourths of all American reading was of a church-sponsored press. But with the advent of the penny newspaper exploiting the growing literacy of the American people, the Protestant churches retreated from the arena of public debate with a loss both to the church and to society.

The editor of the typical Protestant church paper is an over-

worked and under-paid ex-pastor or board secretary.<sup>7</sup> Usually neither he nor his small staff (average three persons) has had specialized training in journalism or in the social sciences. He is primarily a churchman, concerned mainly to promote institutional programs in the limited space at his disposal. His paper is a poorly-edited, small circulating "house organ," with a limited range of comment on events in the world. It uses religious language in a way which much of the church's constituency does not understand.

The usual denominational editor, like his fellow minister in the local church, does not interpret his role as that of influencing public opinion on issues such as inflation control and federal tax policy. The "moral-political issues" he becomes most excited about are those which most directly affect the institutional life of his church: public funds for parochial education, gambling, the appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican. One major denominational paper devoted more column inches to reports on how missionaries and church property were affected by the Korean war than to articles discussing the issues of that war.

The Protestant educational and communication program manifests the church's inadequate discernment of the whole world as its parish. Protestant religious leaders have seldom developed local church programs to discuss the basic structure or content of the mass media. Much ministerial criticism of the press has not gone beyond opposing Sunday movies and liquor ads and complaints at failure of the press to give additional space to promotion and reports of church activities. Here is an example. Ten readers protested an article by Henry Luce which appeared in the *Christian Century* because of liquor advertisements in Luce's magazines. A church official called Luce "America's greatest liquor advertiser." Another said: "Liquor ads have

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7. See R. E. Wolsely, "The Church Press: Bulwark of Denominational Sovereignty," *Christendom*, Autumn, 1946, pages 490-500. Also R. E. Wolsely, "The Plight of Religious Journalism," *Crozer Quarterly*, July, 1946, pages 215-221; Kenneth Underwood, "A Study of the Religious Press," *Information Service*, May 23, 1942, and "Religious Education Materials from a Journalist's Viewpoint," *Religious Education*, May-June, 1946.

dirtied up Luce's publications until I will not allow one of them in my home." Such "single-issue" sniping at the mass media will help little in making them more accountable to the millions who are influenced by them.

Now we turn from the key opinion makers and their values to the public which consumes their product.

## THE PUBLIC: IMAGE AND REALITY

In his grim novel, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, George Orwell portrays a totalitarian state called Oceania with three rigid classes, the inner party, the regular party, and the proles (the uneducated masses). Public opinion, past and present, is manufactured in the Ministry of Truth. Popular culture is mass produced. Books for the proles are ground out by novel-writing machines which reshuffle six basic plots for variety. Public opinion is a simple matter in Oceania. The only duty of the press is to manipulate the people according to the will of the dictator, Big Brother, who has nothing but contempt for "his comrades."

Public opinion is more complicated in a free society. But even in America, as in Oceania, the attitude of the communicator toward the public affects profoundly his message. What do mass communicators in America think of their audiences? Does their image of the public correspond to the facts of science and the insights of the Christian faith?

### *Help from the Advertising Man*

The American press did not have much concrete knowledge about "the public" (that mysterious and amorphous entity to which it was speaking) until the advertising man came along. Advertisers were interested mainly in statistics. "How many potential customers for my toothpaste or deoderant do you reach?" they asked. From their audience analysis we learn much about the public as a consumer of the popular press and the



products it advertises.<sup>8</sup> The average American spends one-fifth of his waking hours reading or looking at the mass media. Only one out of four people reads books. Some 700 million "comic books" are sold every year. Seventy million persons read them. According to reliable estimates 98 per cent of all children between eight and 12 years of age read comics. One study showed that 81 per cent of city adults read comic books with some regularity. TV is cutting into comic reading; the children say, "TV is comic books with moving pictures and real voices." In some areas children average 19½ hours a week of television-viewing.

The movies live financially on children from 10 to 19 years of age who attend steadily and almost automatically. One-third of the population (adolescent) provides two-thirds of the movie-goers. Half the people are probably frequent-to-habitual radio listeners. The "lively arts" (TV, radio, movies, comic books) which deal predominantly with entertainment, not information, take up far more of the public's time and attention than the less vivid media, newspapers, magazines, and books. The average newspaper reader spends about 15 minutes with the headlines and lead sentences, five minutes on the sports pages, and about 30 seconds on his favorite comic strip or columnist. One reader out of seven looks at the editorials. In short, the American spends most of his time with those aspects of popular communication which carry the least information basic to the formation of a sound public opinion.

### *The Communicator's Mass Man*

The ad men did more than count noses, although this is still their major occupation. Their drive for bigger and bigger audiences led them to an analysis of those "universal characteristics" of the public which can be appealed to in selling toothpaste, motor oil, or tombstones. The radio men usually went about it

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8. The average direct expenditures per American family for communication in 1947 were: Movies, \$28.51; Radio and TV, \$21.07; Newspapers, \$15.63; Books, \$12.62; and Magazines, \$7.42; making a total of \$85.25.



this way. They found out what broadcasts were listened to most. Then they concluded, quite unjustifiably, that such programs were what most people wanted. "It is clear that women want soap operas, since more women tune in to them than anything else on the air during the day," they said, ignoring the plain fact that three-quarters of the women with radios did not listen to them at all.

An analysis of the most popular broadcasts and movies reinforced the communicators long-held belief that the public wants entertainment, psychological escape, excitement, and sob stories to liven up a humdrum existence, something to laugh at, rhythmic music, and standard stories with interchangeable plots. "A mass medium," said Frank Stanton, president of CBS, "can only achieve its great audience . . . by giving the majority of the people what they want." Behind these revealing words is the image of a *majority man*, a mass man, to whom the press feels obligated to direct its output.

This image of a monolithic public made up of undifferentiated units represents a projection of the numerical standards which dominate the judgment of so many advertisers, communicators, and professions in our culture. The constant pressure for grinding out the material for tomorrow's deadline leaves "no pause for reflection," as a wistful *Life* editorial put it. This image of a mass audience has resulted in a stereotyped, standardized product. Instead of meeting the varied interests and needs of the public (which they have seldom used their research to find out), American communicators have helped to create the very mass audience they profess to serve. They concentrate upon a mass man whom they have helped to create.

The mythical *majority man* of the press wants entertainment, not facts. He is interested in personalities, not issues. He is not very bright, so the output of the radio, screen, and printed page must be simple. Not as simple, necessarily, as a certain Hearst paper which A. J. Liebling said "is aimed at the intellectual level of a slightly subnormal strip-tease girl." The *majority man* is



sensitive. He must be handled with kid gloves by the press, so he will not be offended and turned away. He must want to come back to the press for more. If he doesn't come back, he is lost forever to the communicator. Therefore, he must never be criticized. Words of censure are reserved for persons quite unlike himself, the bad guys, the politicians, the Communists. He must be made to feel important, so he is reminded constantly that he is a good guy, a regular Joe, the backbone of America. In short, the mass communicator's *majority man* is reduced to a lowest-common-denominator-consumer-animal.

Much of the more recent audience research has indicated the diversity of interest in the various sex, age, occupational, and educational segments of the public. Some radio men and magazine editors have enriched their content accordingly. For the most part, the advertising men take audience studies more seriously than the editors. Commenting on recent studies of *Life* magazine's audience, the director of research for *Life* said: "As a matter of fact I would willingly wager that a comparatively small minority of the editorial staff is even aware of their existence, much less know and understand their findings and meaning. As a case in point I might mention that we are probably unique in the magazine field as being *the one magazine that does no research on the likes or dislikes of the readers for the guidance of the editors.*"<sup>9</sup>

### *The Actual Public—A Diversity of Gifts*

A communicator's image of man discerns the mass characteristics in all of us, but ignores the diversity of gifts which God has given us. America, more than most countries, is a pluralistic society. Its 150 million people make up something of a unified and common public in attitude toward issues, but they are also composed of several other "sub-cultures" or publics. Within each group each person has a unique and singular worth as a child of God. The variety of interests and talents is tremendous.

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9. In a letter from A. Edward Miller, Director of Research, *Life*, to Ernest Lefever, January 22, 1951. (italics added)

"We may not find a pencil maker who reads Sanskrit and writes poetry, but we can discover a broker who composes music and a taxi driver who collects butterflies," says Gilbert Seldes.<sup>10</sup>

Public opinion, like our Christian faith, is formed and held in community. The vocational and interest groups to which we belong shape our values and modify our conduct. The American culture is made up of Methodists, Rotarians, Democrats, preachers, business men, women's clubs, labor unions, Negroes, Jews, and Fuller Brush salesmen. Despite the multitude of groups to which Americans belong, only 31 per cent are members of organizations which take positions on public issues.<sup>11</sup> These "joiners" are more active politically than the unorganized and exert a far greater influence on opinion and public policy than their numbers would indicate.

### *The Actual Public—Common Characteristics*

Acknowledging the great diversity in the American people, we must nonetheless recognize that there is some truth in the communicator's image of a mass man. We must recognize that there are certain common elements or tendencies in the "American character" which cannot be overlooked by those seeking to mold public opinion and which are heightened by the sustained appeal by much of the mass press to them. Here are six closely interrelated *negative* elements in the American character, suggested by Gabriel A. Almond.<sup>12</sup>

1. *Americans are individualistic*, concerned with private values "as distinguished from social-group, political, or religious-moral values. (Their) concern with private, worldly success is (their) most absorbing aim."

2. *Americans are materialistic*, competing "with other indi-

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10. *The Great Audience*. New York: Viking Press, 1951, page 225. This book is a penetrating critique of movies, TV, and radio.

11. Elmo Roper and Louis Harris, "Crime, Reform and the Voter," in *Saturday Review of Literature*, April 7, 1951.

12. *The American People and Foreign Policy*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1950, pages 29-86.

viduals and families for values which are largely 'material' in character."

3. *Americans seek psychological escape.* This is indicated in their "widespread addiction to highly stimulating mass entertainment, the radio, movies, comics, and the like."

4. *Americans want easy answers.* They believe complex political problems can be solved in simple, individualistic terms. They expect miracles from popular heroes such as MacArthur and blame the ills of the world on demons such as Stalin.

5. *Americans have rapidly shifting moods.* In foreign policy, for example, the mood shifts from full intervention in wartime to complete withdrawal between wars. Americans tend to over-react to threat and to become apathetic during a period of equilibrium. They shift from optimism to pessimism rather than maintaining a steady realistic attitude.

6. *Americans are conformists,* especially in "social and political matters." They tend to follow "the changing culture as it impinges on (them) through the various social institutions and media of communication." David Reisman and Erich Fromm have emphasized the American tendency to escape from responsibility and to submit to the authority of the majority, pointing out the grave danger of the political apathy toward which these attitudes lead. President Truman in 1951 warned against "the deadly imposition of conformity." An article in *Fortune* spelled out the implications: "Conformity, it would appear, is being elevated into something akin to a religion. . . . Perhaps Americans will arrive at an ant society, not through fiat of a dictator, but through unbridled desire to get along with one another."<sup>13</sup>

These negative characteristics of the American character are not distributed equally among the entire population. They differ

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13. *Is Anybody Listening?* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952. This book includes the series of *Fortune* articles on communication between American business and the public.



somewhat according to social class, educational level, age, and sex. But there is substantial evidence from independent sources (political science, social psychology, public opinion experts, and communications and advertising researchers) indicating that there are strong and widespread tendencies in the American people toward the type of response to public issues described by Almond. This does not mean that we have "an ant society" or a mass society of people with identical interests and attitudes. It does mean that there are strong tendencies toward greater conformity which can be ignored only to our peril.

Our faith in a God who seeks to redeem all men compels us to see our neighbors as they are in their deepest nature and potentiality—whole persons in a whole community. We must recognize their diversity and their common needs. There is always the temptation for all of us, and most obviously succumbed to by the advertiser after a "quick" response or the demagogic writer after a wide following, to appeal to partial persons, to their private and material values, to their desire to escape responsibility, to the fear of Communists and of B.O., the desire for acceptance and sex appeal, the longing for comfort and peace of mind.

### *The Protestant Press and Its Audience*

The Protestant press has a specialized public. But its audience represents the diversity and common elements of the public at large. Income, occupation, and where one lives appear to be more important than church membership in determining public opinion and political behavior. Most Protestants in the North vote Republican if they live in rural areas. Their laboring brethren in the big city tend to vote Democratic. In Mississippi upper income white Protestants are predominantly Dixicrats. In short, the political outlook of a Protestant is very much like that of non-Protestants in his own socio-economic-racial group.

The denominational editor's image of his audience is probably even less realistic than that of the popular communicator. Since his paper does not carry national advertising, no studies

have been made of his audience. He does not know how many people read his material or what they like and dislike. His image of God-fearing and faithful church-centered readers is a projection of his own institutional loyalty. He looks upon his readers as supporters of his denominational program, not as whole persons whose waking hours are spent making a living, playing, and being a citizen in the community. He addresses his message to partial persons in a partial community. He uses the same language and symbolism for laborers, businessmen, and professional people. In short, he directs his communications to an imaginary "mass Protestant."

## THE CONTENT OF THE POPULAR PRESS

"We at M-G-M never made a bad picture," said vice president Howard Dietz at a recent gathering of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer salesmen in Chicago. "The picture may not have done as expected at the box-office," he added, "but it was not a bad film. Sometimes it is the public that is the flop." These revealing words raise a basic question. Who decides what is good and what is bad in the American press? The press itself? The box-office? Or both? Or are there some standards beyond both press and box-office? How can we as Christians judge the contribution of newspapers, magazines, movies, radio, and TV to a responsible public opinion?

### *A Yardstick for Measuring Responsibility*

A community of persons under God can exist only in an atmosphere of free discussion. Responsible decisions about the direction of the community as a whole require an informed public opinion. Four basic requirements for a responsible press were spelled out by the distinguished Commission on Freedom of the Press:<sup>14</sup>

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14. *A Free and Responsible Press*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1947, pages 20 to 28. Members of the Commission were: Robert M. Hutchins, chairman; Zechariah Chafee, Jr. (law), Harvard, vice-chairman; John M. Clark

1. *The press should "provide a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning."* It is not enough to report "the fact" truthfully. It is necessary to report "the truth about the fact."

2. *The press should be "a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism."* The media should regard themselves as "common carriers" of public information, and feel duty-bound to operate "in the public interest." They should report all significant ideas, viewpoints, and interests of the nation. Fact and opinion should be presented separately and their sources given.

3. *The press should give "a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society."* Religious, racial, national, and economic minorities should be pictured fairly along with dominant groups.

4. *The press should present and clarify "the goals and values of the society."* The overall values of freedom, justice, democracy should be defined in terms of specific political alternatives.

According to these exacting canons of responsibility, how has the American press performed?

### ***Entertainment, Persuasion, and Some Information***

The content of the mass press reflects the values of the communicator and his attitude toward the public. The popular press is overwhelmingly devoted to entertaining and only a tiny portion concerns itself with public affairs. Says the Commission:

The American newspaper is now as much a medium of entertainment, specialized information, and advertising as it is of news. A solid evening of radio adds up to something

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(economics), Columbia; John Dickinson (Pennsylvania Railroad); William E. Hocking (philosophy), Harvard; Harold D. Lasswell (law), Yale; Archibald MacLeish (rhetoric), Harvard; Charles E. Merriam (political science), Harvard; Reinhold Niebuhr (Christian ethics), Union Theological Seminary; Robert Redfield (anthropology), Chicago; Beardsley Ruml (Federal Reserve Bank of N.Y.); Arthur M. Schlesinger (history), Harvard; and George N. Shuster, president of Hunter College.



like the reading of a mass-circulation newspaper except that the percentage of reporting and discussion of public affairs is even lower. It goes as low as zero in the case of some local stations, as low as 2 per cent in many, and up to 10 per cent in some network affiliates. The magazines of largest circulation provide a mixed menu of print, pictures, stories, articles, and gossip, to entertain and inform persons of all ages and tastes, with advertising occupying half or more of each issue. The motion picture, as everybody knows, has developed mainly and avowedly as a medium of mass entertainment.<sup>15</sup>

In those sectors of the American press where public events are dealt with (mainly newspapers, magazines, and radio commentaries) the Commission's canons of responsibility are constantly violated. These canons are high and difficult of achievement. They require that communicators seek to control their bias, their judgment of what is good or bad in public life, so that all the important facts or events and all the important interpretations of these events are given the people. Yet study after study of particular media reveals the way in which communicators distort or ignore interpretations contrary to their own in reporting events.<sup>16</sup> The Commission, furthermore, doesn't want reporters in their rush to meet tomorrow's deadline to present a series of unrelated events, stripped of continuity and meaning. Yet communicators under the guise of a false objectivity often present facts in isolation from the "goals and values" of community.

The Commission wants the context of meaning and value to emerge out of the work of staffs composed of men with various convictions, out of forums for exchange of comment and criticism, out of a representative projection of the aspirations of various groups. But the press too often tells the reader only what *it* holds is important and of value.

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15. *op. cit.*, *A Free and Responsible Press*, pages 53 and 54.

16. For example, Susan Kingsbury and others. *Newspapers and News*. New York: Putnam's Sons, 1937; Leon Svirsky, ed. *Your Newspaper: Blueprint for a Better Press*. New York: Macmillan, 1947.

The press frequently uses its prestige-conferring power by headlining personalities and views it favors. Washington correspondents have given prestige to the irresponsible rantings of Senator McCarthy, often ignoring testimony on the other side. The biggest news story of 1951, according to the Associated Press, was "the fight of a man for an issue. That man was General Douglas MacArthur and the issue was how to win the Korean War without starting a global one. It was a bigger story," said AP, "than the story of the bloody war in Korea itself." AP's Ten Top Stories of the Year reveal something of its scale of news values:

1. MacArthur's dismissal and the Big Debate
2. Korean War and truce talks
3. Decay in public morality (Kefauver, RFC, and tax probes)
4. Churchill's victory in British elections
5. Sports scandals
6. Kansas and Missouri floods
7. The battle against inflation
8. Tension in the Mid-East
9. Atomic development and "fantastic" new weapons
10. NATO and General Eisenhower in Europe

### *Henry Luce's 'TIME and LIFE*

*Time* (circulation, 1,585,237) and *Life* (over 5,200,000) illustrate the shortcomings and possibilities of America's leading news and picture magazines in becoming responsible agencies of public information. Luce weeklies operate on the assumption, as the Twenty-fifth Anniversary issue of *Time* candidly indicates, that facts cannot interpret themselves and that readers want editors to give them a judgment as to the "goodness" or "badness" of events. But the Luce weeklies rarely make explicit the actual value framework from which they select and interpret the news. *Time*, as far as public issues are concerned, is one big editorial masquerading as news. *Life* does its readers the courtesy of making a great number of its prejudices explicit in its editorial page.

The Luce magazines have tremendous staff and research

resources, and they have done some notable work in acquainting the American public with the importance of many public issues. The choice by *Time* of Mossadegh as "Man of the Year," for example, jarred the American public into greater understanding of the dynamic and crucial nature of political movements in the Middle East. The *Life* issue on Asia contained important public knowledge for foreign policy decisions. But if one is to read the Luce weeklies for his major source of public information, he must realize that the recruitment and use of the staffs are narrowed by many highly dogmatic convictions. Some of these convictions are, for example, that World War III is already here, that Secretary of State Acheson is Public Enemy No. 1, and that an unfettered MacArthur could have led us to glorious victory in Asia.

The Luce weeklies advance their prejudices by the heavy use of propaganda devices. The techniques of partial reporting, selective quotation, and the use of emotionally-charged slogans are common. They ridicule the administration, for example, by selecting photographs of President Truman which undercut him personally and presumably throw his policies into discredit. Two recent issues of *Life* did this. One (Dec. 10, 1951) carried 39 photographs of Mr. Truman to indicate that he had poor taste in his wardrobe. Another (Dec. 3, 1951) devoted a page to show that the President was a fast eater at a banquet.

Every news magazine has a right to its own political views but a public organ of communication has the corresponding duty to make clear and explicit the premises of its policy and to avoid deliberate distortion of news to serve its own positions. The chief sin of most publications as that of *Time-Life* is the development of a "God-Almighty attitude" which precludes the admission of truth from other quarters or *genuine discussion* of the basic political issues of our day. The goals and values of society are not so much clarified as twisted to serve the provincial interests of editors who have assumed the pose of omnipresence and infallibility. As a distinguished political scientist





observed, "The seven-day span between issues is most frequently used to chop up, retouch, and slant the news to a point where its resemblance with the facts is purely coincidental."<sup>17</sup>

### *Radio, TV, and Movies*

The American radio, along with newspapers and magazines, has failed to act as a responsible channel of public information, despite the fact that its charter requires it to operate "in the public interest." This is the conclusion of Llewellyn White's report on radio for the Commission on Freedom of the Press.<sup>18</sup> Despite the increasing amount of time given to current issues since 1933, Mr. White says that the total volume of radio "news" is not adequate. Ninety per cent of it is supplied by "commentators" who lack "either a sound college education or its equivalent in experience . . . in the specialized fields of political science, economics, government, etc." The TV and radio media do not spend the money necessary to process programs of public information which will get them listened to or viewed. The amount and quality of public discussion is likewise inadequate. Minority groups do not have sufficient opportunity to be heard on controversial issues.

Movies are devoted more exclusively to entertainment than any other mass medium. One survey in 1930 indicated that less than one per cent of 500 movies dealt with social problems. The increasing number of films on public issues does not modify the conclusion that the Hollywood dream factory has almost written itself off as a channel of information and enlightenment on major political and economic issues.

Every agency of the popular press, to a lesser or a greater extent, has failed to observe the canons of responsibility set up by the Commission. This performance reveals a spiritual poverty which all of us share.

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17. Max Ascoli in *The Reporter*, Feb. 14, 1950, page 4. For a readable account of *Life's* editorial position see "Life—Scoreboard in the Sky," by Fred M. Hechinger in this same issue of *The Reporter*, pages 15 to 19.

18. Llewellyn White. *The American Radio*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947, pages 212 to 224.

## *The Limitations of the Protestant Press*

The small budgets available to church communicators for educational activities often make necessary a limited and sometimes irresponsible program of publication. Staffs must be small and non-specialized and simply cannot keep informed on the public issues in which great moral principles are involved. Often the Protestant press is less responsible than the "secular" press in the way in which it asks readers to make judgments upon issues without adequate information being supplied them. Sweeping condemnations of war, power politics, corruption, business immorality, labor abuses are made without understanding of the concrete context in which leaders must make their decisions.

Many Protestant communicators have made great effort to use the limited funds at their disposal to provide a process whereby various perspectives and specializations could be brought to bear upon the preparation of study documents on public issues. They have often felt that this was a basic communications task which must come first. But these documents have often lacked the power of effective communication, in part because funds were not available to obtain the time of writers necessary to put the material into readable form. Moreover, the limitation of funds and motivation has also prevented publication of popular journals which would provide an exchange of views and comments, and reports of varied developments in religious thought and action. The Protestant press, like the popular press, stands with its audiences, under the judgment of God for inadequate communication in the modern world.

## THE EFFECT OF THE PRESS ON PUBLIC OPINION

"Is anybody listening?" This question which *Fortune* addressed to publicists for American business might well be asked of the popular press. The obvious answer is that everybody is listening—how could anyone escape the enormous output of



words, images, and sounds of the world's greatest communications industry? There is no place to hide, as there is no escape from the ubiquitous *telescreen* in Orwell's 1984. The more important question is this. What effect does this listening have on public opinion in America?

### *The Power of the Popular Press*

"There exists today no means of influencing the masses more potent than the cinema," said Pope Pius XI in 1936. That was before the days of TV. For decades churchmen and educators have paid lip service to the power of the mass media. But it has been the totalitarian-minded politicians and the advertising men who have taken mass communication most seriously. Everyone knows that the press is a mighty instrument for mass persuasion, but it is not all-powerful. We are just beginning to learn *how* effective communication is under *various conditions*.

Interest in public issues may be increased or decreased by the mass press. In its preoccupation with entertaining the press tends to divert certain groups away from public questions. Further, the media sometimes present public issues in such a complex and poorly interpreted manner they encourage political apathy. Overwhelmed, many individuals withdraw into the cozy security of their private lives.

The media also affect particular opinions. They may *reinforce* an existing opinion, or they may *change* it. When an attitude is reinforced it is made more active, and is more likely to be expressed in political behavior, such as voting or telling one's neighbor what one thinks.

The effect of the press on public opinion depends upon (1) the nature of the *communication*, (2) the kinds of *issues* involved, (3) the type of *people* who are listening, and (4) the different *conditions* under which it takes place.<sup>19</sup>

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19. This four-fold analysis is based on Bernard Berelson's heavily-documented essay, "Communication and Public Opinion," in *The Reader in Public Opinion and Communication*. Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1950, pages 448 to 462.

## *The Nature of the Communication*

The more personal the media, the more effective it is in changing opinions. In general, the personal conversation is more effective than TV, TV more effective than radio, and radio more effective than a newspaper account. Our basic attitudes toward public questions, like our religious beliefs, are formed in community, in the personal give and take with our friends and acquaintances. The power of this "personal" element is illustrated by the fact that Kate Smith was able to sell on the radio in one day almost \$40,000,000 worth of war bonds. It helps to explain the effectiveness of President Roosevelt's "fireside chats."

Specialized channels in which the audience has confidence are more effective in modifying opinion than general channels. A trade union member is more likely to believe what he reads about labor in the *CIO News* than in the daily newspaper. The *Farm Journal* was more influential in changing the voting of Ohio farmers than *Collier's* in the 1940 presidential election studied by Paul Lazarsfeld.

Attitudes appear to be changed more by *events* than by *reports* of events, and more by *reports* than by *interpretations* of events. An event would influence only those who actually experience it if it were not for communication. So as far as public questions are concerned it is the words and pictures about the event that count. Even the most "objective" reports involve interpretation, but people seem to have more confidence in vivid "news reports" than in "editorials." This explains why "news magazines" such as *Time* can be so influential in molding public opinion.

*Emotional* content seems to be more effective than *rational* content. This is particularly true where there is widespread fear or insecurity. Hitler's "big lie" technique is far less effective in a stable society. Content which confronts the poorly educated audience with black-white decisions is more effective than a careful analysis of the complexities involved. This effectiveness

is increased if there is a real or imagined reward for "deciding right."

### *The Different Kinds of Issues*

The press is more effective in influencing opinion on new issues than on those where people have "made up their minds." It is more influential on peripheral issues than central issues. A person has a deep emotional stake in retaining an existing attitude, especially if it concerns an issue "close to the heart." It is easier probably to get a strict Southern Baptist to change his opinion on federal aid to education than on baptism by immersion.

Communications are more effective in changing opinion on "personalities" than on "issues." The mass press exploits to the hilt the desire of Americans for individual heroes and villains, frequently obscuring the issues involved. If *Life* wants most effectively to discredit a proposal (say, national health insurance) it attacks the personality (Mr. Truman) identified with that proposal.

### *The Different Types of People*

A person is less likely to change his opinion if it is strongly held than if it is a tentative commitment. A strong predisposition toward a certain opinion makes for a greater interest in an issue which enforces the opinion, contributes to an earlier decision on the issue, and fewer changes afterwards. In fact, strongly disposed people avoid material with a contrary viewpoint and even manage to misunderstand such material when confronted with it. Racially prejudiced people often cannot understand educational cartoons which teach tolerance.

The less informed people are on an issue the more likely they are to change their opinion about it. Well-informed people tend to have clear-cut opinions. People with considerable formal education are less responsive to "emotional" content than people with little education.



## *Different Conditions Alter Effect*

In totalitarian states such as the Soviet Union the press is a monopoly enterprise. In such situations the press is more effective than in America, for example, where alternative proposals compete with one another in the market place of ideas. But even a monopoly press is not all-powerful. Propaganda Minister Goebbles failed to convert large groups of Germans to full-fledged National Socialism. Personal contact and mutual reinforcement among members of the Confessing Church, to name one group, enabled them to keep democratic and Christian values alive in Nazi Germany.

In America we do not have a monopoly situation where one party controls the nation's press. We have various oligarchies of ownership and management, as has been indicated, and on various levels. Indeed, there are communities in America where the ownership and management of the local daily newspaper and radio station are the same, and where ministers have found that even a parish paper brings pressure on the church by its challenge of local press monopoly. But the chief source of our freedom is the varied centers of political and economic power in the entire society to which the press must accommodate. Thus, the effectiveness of the "quantity exposure" of the mass press, its strong use of "personalized," emotional appeals are neutralized considerably by conflicting viewpoints which do emerge within it, by the special-interest and minority presses, by the effectiveness of personal contacts, and by the independent judgment of the audience.

## *Our Climate of Ideas*

One-half of adult Americans seldom attend movies. Does that mean that they are not influenced by the movies? Decidedly not. We all live in a climate of values and ideas influenced profoundly by the mass press. The media not only reflect the changing culture in which we live, but they reinforce it or modify it as it changes. The "philosophy" of the *Reader's Digest* is part of the atmosphere we all breathe.

It is here the popular media have their greatest influence. By helping to create the climate of values in which our political decisions are made, they have a tremendous influence on the direction of our society. They can set the tone of public debate by emotional slogans and slanted humor. Terms such as "socialized medicine" and jokes against bureaucrats make difficult positive and constructively critical use of the government. The terms prejudice discussion by communicating partial political definitions. "Freedom," for example, is usually defined as "absence of government intervention." In short, the mass media structure political issues for the public. They call the terms of the debate. People tend to talk politics along the lines laid down by the popular press.

The overall influence of the mass media is largely conservative. They advance the political conservatism of their editors, publishers, producers, and broadcasters. In order to "satisfy" the largest possible audience the media tend to reinforce the status quo rather than challenge it with new ideas. Mass entertainment is not neutral—it tends to promote apathy. The few exceptional movies such as *A Place in the Sun*, *The Death of a Salesman*, and *Grapes of Wrath*, each seen by a relatively small number of people, do not change the prevailing climate of values. The atmosphere in which we live is more affected by the pictures of Cecil B. de Mille, seen in all their gaudy mediocrity and distortion of Biblical religion.

We often laugh at the spectacle of a middle-age housewife enamored by the movie amours of Van Johnson, or joke about those who write to Dorothy Dix for advice. But it is no laughing matter. For these acts of close attention to the mass media are *religious* acts. A study of the motifs in the mass media—the themes of romantic love, of glorification of youth and a sentimental handling of religion—is a study in the "real religions" of the mass audience. If the "mass man" does not find meaning and motivation through his church, then he turns elsewhere. And usually today he will turn to the movies, or magazines, or radio for images of how to interpret the political and economic

events that pour in upon him. The self-help columns intensify his absorption in his own private world. He finds comfort and reassurance in the easy simplicisms of the *Reader's Digest* about the nature of social change.

The shallowness and distortion of these notions is not simply a judgment upon the communicator or the audience. Rather these false religions are a judgment upon the traditional church groups for failing to provide the necessary patterns of meaning and motivation for the lives of ordinary people. The Protestant churches must see them, not as an occasional aberration from standards of taste and intelligence, but as indications of the need for a religious interpretation that gives significance to life.

### *The Effect of Protestant Communication*

We Protestants have not taken seriously the mass media because we do not regard them as channels for God's healing and redeeming action. We have not tried to influence public opinion on central moral issues such as inflation and fiscal policy because we do not look upon the whole world as our parish. The intense interest of religious leaders in special issues such as prohibition and an ambassador to the Vatican betrays an institutional self-defensiveness.

What, then, has been the influence of the Protestant churches on public opinion? With rare exceptions there has been little direct transformation of the popular values and interpretations assigned by the mass press to current events. Indirectly, we have chiefly provided a religious sanction for the status quo either by repeating or by making no critical contact with the religion of *Reader's Digest* and of "David and Bathsheba." Along with segments of the "secular" press we have helped to reinforce negative elements in the American character by appealing to a sterile individualism and the desire for simple answers. We have rebelled against God by communicating untruth and provincial loyalties, and by refusing to assume any genuine responsibility for improving the mass media. In our rebellion and in our confusion we have limited God's redemptive work in this generation.



## TOWARD A SOUND PUBLIC OPINION: STEPS WE CAN TAKE

"To criticize radio, why, that's un-American!" These cryptic words from Victor Ranter, when he was vice president of CBS, express the usual view of many mass communicators. But there has been in the past five years a growing awareness on the part of educators, social scientists, the public, and the press itself of reforms needed in popular communications. A democracy cannot long endure without a *free and responsible press*. It must be free from the domination of either government or private interests. It must be responsible to the people, serving them as a "common carrier" of facts, ideas, and values essential to democratic discussion and decision. The mass media, like the church, the school, and the government, stand under the constant judgment of God.

There are many points in the American press where changes can be made. None should be neglected.<sup>20</sup>

### *What the Government Can Do*

In America freedom of the press is threatened today not by the government, but by the powerful private interests which exercise major control in and upon it. To insure free expression the government must take positive action.

1. The constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press should be made to include the radio and movies which now suffer under unnecessary restrictions.

2. The government should "facilitate new ventures in the communications industry, foster the introduction of new techniques (and) maintain competition among large units through the antitrust laws." These laws should be "sparingly used" to break up large units. Where concentration is essential, the government should see that the public benefits from it.

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20. The recommendations for action by the government, the press, and the public summarize those made by the Commission on Freedom of the Press.

3. "As an alternative to the present remedy for libel (suing for damages in a civil court), we recommend legislation by which the injured party might obtain a retraction or a restatement of the facts by the offender or an opportunity to reply." This will help to "diminish lying in the press."

4. "We recommend the repeal of legislation prohibiting expressions in favor of revolutionary changes in our institutions where there is no clear and present danger that violence will result from the expressions."

5. The government should keep the people fully informed of its policies. If the press is unable or unwilling to transmit this vital information to the public, "the government itself may employ media of its own."

### *What the Press Can Do*

If the press took strong reform measures on its own initiative, the amount of government intervention necessary would be reduced.

1. The agencies of mass communication should "accept the responsibilities of common carriers of information and discussion."

2. The different media should finance "new, experimental activities in their fields."

3. Members of the press should "engage in vigorous mutual criticism." At this point outstanding service has been performed by A. J. Liebling's "The Wayward Press" in the *New Yorker* and by the *Reporter*, a three-year-old fortnightly edited by Max Ascoli.

4. The press should "increase the competence, independence, and effectiveness of its staff." By "independence" the Commission means the absence of control imposed by owners, publishers, advertisers, or producers on their writers or commentators.

5. The radio-TV industry should control its own programs and, like the more responsible newspapers, advertising should be separated entirely from general content.

## *What the Public Can Do*

The American people are not sufficiently critical of their press. They are not aware of its concentrations of power, its narrow loyalties, and its tremendous influence over their lives. The Commission makes three recommendations for action by the public.

1. Nonprofit institutions, dedicated to the public interest, should be established to "help supply the variety, quality, and quantity of press service required by the American people."
2. "Academic-professional centers of advanced study, research, and publication in the field of mass communication" should be set up.
3. "We recommend the establishment of a new and independent agency to appraise and report annually on the performance of the press," in the light of the four canons developed by the Commission (see page 26).

## *What the Protestant Churches Can Do*

Protestant leaders must come to recognize that public opinion is more than a game played by Dr. Gallup, that it is in fact an expression of a people's faith. God cares *how we think* and *what we do* about great public issues. He is concerned with who wins in elections. He is concerned with the control, the message, and the effect of the popular press. In order to catch up in this neglected field we make three recommendations to Protestant leaders.

1. The churches should prepare study material on the Christian faith and public opinion for study on the national, state, and local level. (Note resource material under "Good Reading" at the end of this article.)
2. The National Council of Churches should set up a commission to study the Christian faith and public opinion. This commission should prepare a critique of the American press and its influence on Protestant thinking. It should study the total impact of the churches in our modern industrial society.

The commission should include public opinion experts, political scientists, psychologists, journalists, and educators as well as theologians and churchmen representing agencies on evangelism, religious education, home missions, and social action.

3. The churches should provide the resources and polity for groups to specialize in producing, in their own name, material for the church press and for the mass media, giving a Christian interpretation of public issues. In other words, the church would develop, check and sustain serious attempts to influence opinion on central political problems. Such material would seek to reflect the breadth of the Gospel and the careful findings of social science. At present there is little Protestant material which meets these qualifications.

One attempt of a Council of Churches to provide for molding of local public opinion is the *Religion at the News Desk* program in New Haven, Connecticut. This is a weekly commentary on major news developments from a Protestant point of view. Like this *Social Action* series, *Religion at the News Desk* is the product of group research, discussion, and writing. It attempts to utilize the findings of students of theology, political science, economics, and world politics as well as the best informed opinion available. Prepared as a weekly 15-minute radio program, *Religion at the News Desk* is rebroadcast over 20 local stations and is used in many church, college and seminary discussion groups.<sup>21</sup>

### *What the Christian Citizen Can Do*

As Christian citizens we are all consumers of the mass media. There are two contributions we can make toward a more responsible public opinion.

1. We can become critical readers, lookers, and listeners. We need standards in order to discriminate between the less

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21. Further information about this unique approach or sample commentaries on subjects such as Senator Taft, General Eisenhower, the national budget, or inflation control can be obtained by writing *Religion at the News Desk*, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven 11, Connecticut.



and more responsible media. Such standards are hard to come by. The church has provided almost no guidance for us in this matter, so we will need to secure most of it from sources such as those suggested at the end of this article. The writers of this series recommend the Sunday *New York Times* (particularly the "News of the Week in Review" section), the *Reporter*, the *New Yorker*, *Harpers*, Public Affairs Committee Pamphlets, *Christianity and Crisis*, *Information Service* of the National Council of Churches, and *Religion at the News Desk* for Protestants who want to keep up with the basic facts, ideas, and values necessary for responsible political behavior.

2. The job of religious influence in the press is much bigger than patronizing the better media and boycotting the bad. We must join with others in church, educational, and political groups to plan strategy for improving the American press. Solid action must be based on thorough study. (The pamphlets listed at the conclusion of this article include suggestions for action.) We can start by criticizing constructively the content of the radio, newspaper, and movies in our local community. We can urge our churches to provide funds adequate to hire staffs able to deal with complex social issues. We can urge our church leaders to study public opinion in light of our faith in a God who seeks to redeem us not one by one, but as persons-in-community.

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## Discussion Questions

1. How does the compartmentalized treatment of religion in the popular press—the Sunday church page, the editorials using traditional religious concepts only at Christmas and Easter—accentuate the separation of religious insights from the discussion of today's headline stories about political and social issues?

2. Review the four basic requirements of a responsible press as outlined by the Commission on the Freedom of the Press. Then apply this yardstick to your local newspaper. How does it match up?

3. Do you think it would be right for an adult Sunday school class to make a study of the *Reader's Digest* and the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and then assess the values implied in these publications in light of the Christian faith (as outlined in the first issue)? What would be the main points of contrast?

4. A group project for 1952: Keep a file on how a church publication treats the 1952 political campaign. Which issues does it tag as of special concern to the Christian? In your opinion are these issues the most crucial ones of the campaign? How is a candidate presented (is it his denominational affiliation that makes him newsworthy)?

5. Survey the offerings of the religious radio programs in your area. Are these programs mostly about the church, its worship services and news of its activities? Or are there any church programs which attempt to give a religious commentary upon the news?

6. Discuss the publications program of your denomination. Have Protestants faced up to the financial support necessary to achieve a church press adequate for modern society? Given the funds available to the denominational leaders, have they used their resources responsibly?

# Sunday School of America

by Robert W. Lynn

Somebody once said that the *Reader's Digest* is the Sunday school of America. This observation is profoundly true—not just as a cute dig about the sermonic touch of the *Digest*, but as an understanding of its place in American culture. For this little magazine has become an ersatz bible to millions of Americans who are unable, in varying degrees, to make sense out of the Bible of the Old and the New Testament. Men are incurably religious. The sociologists tell us that there is no such thing as a culture devoid of a religious faith. When the old religions lose meaning, new faiths rush in to fill the religious void. In a very real sense the *Reader's Digest* and its imitators have arisen to fill the religious void in contemporary American culture. Even further, the religion offered in the *Digest* must be understood as a new religious substitute for the historic Christian faith.

Like other new religions, it takes over the respectable residue of the old faith. This new religion has conveniently appropriated some of the traditional Christian concepts—"God," "love," and "Kingdom of God." But the God pointed to in the pages of the *Reader's Digest* does not seem to be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This "God" is the creation of the religious yearnings of a twentieth century American mentality, and must be understood and judged as such. "God" stands for a miracle man, whom you call upon in times of trouble, as Eddie Rickenbacker did on his rubber raft out on the Pacific. Or in more normal circumstances, "God" appears as the reassuring *alter ego* of the vaguely uneasy, restless and sometimes frustrated man of our times. He is very much in demand these days.

The *Reader's Digest* departs at most other points from historic Christianity. Its ethic is a simplistic trust in the Golden Rule to meet all the exigencies of life. The *Digest's* faith in man is staggering: "A healthy perspective on history gives convincing testimony that human nature . . . is changing for the better

. . . and that human beings are not the ornery, cross-grained, calloused creatures they used to be." And so on down the line of doctrinal differences.

The issue at stake is not old-style theological jealousy between two versions of Christianity. Rather the quarrel is between two contexts of faith—between the historic Christian faith as defined by church tradition and ecumenical statement, and a new cultural religion.

The religious faith offered in the pages of the *Reader's Digest* merits our closest attention. It presents the religion of modern "mass" man, both in and out of the churches. As such, the *Digest* is a penetrating indictment of contemporary culture, and of the Protestant churches as the dominant religious group in that culture. This new religion reveals the banality, the spiritual poverty of our mass culture. Even more important, it is a terrible judgment upon the American churches for our failure to communicate the Gospel in a meaningful way. We miss the point if we interpret the editors of *Reader's Digest* as Machiavellian manipulators of their vast audience. For these men are the high priests of a new religion, a religion of the folk, a religion that is giving meaning and motivation to millions of Americans right now.

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## Good Reading

### Pamphlets and Articles

"Foreign Policy and Public Opinion," *Social Action*, Jan. 15, 1951.

This study indicates the role of public opinion in the formation of U.S. foreign policy in the light of the Christian faith.

Frank, Josette. *Comics, Radio, Movies—and Children*. New York: Public Affairs Committee, 1949.

A study of the influence of certain mass media on children with suggestions for parents, teachers, and the community.

Lefever, Ernest. A series of articles in *Motive*, the Methodist student magazine: "God and the *Reader's Digest*," November, 1951; "Left of Center—Is There a Responsible Voice?" January, 1952; "*Time*, *Life* and Misfortune," February, 1952; and "Probing Protestant Periodicals," March, 1952.

Spingarn, Jerome. *Radio Is Yours*. New York: Public Affairs Committee, 1946.

A critical study of the American broadcasting industry as a "public service" medium.

World Council of Churches. *Evangelization of Modern Man in Mass Society*. New York: World Council of Churches, Oct., 1949.

It discusses aims and methods of Christian evangelism in contemporary industrial society.

### Books

Almond, Gabriel A. *The American People and Foreign Policy*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1950.

The standard work in the field. It has an excellent chapter on "the American Character."

Berelson, Bernard and Morris Janowitz. *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication*. Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1950.

The best collection of essays on the subject in one volume. It includes articles on all phases of the topic from 1900 to 1950.

Commission on Freedom of the Press. *A Free and Responsible Press*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947.

A report of the most comprehensive study of the American press ever made. It studies the press as it relates to public opinion. The findings and recommendations of the Commission are included.

Doob, Leonard W. *Public Opinion and Propaganda*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948.

A solid study of the relation between public opinion and propaganda by a social psychologist.

Lazersfeld, Paul F. and others. *The People's Choice*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944.

A scientific study of how the voter makes up his mind in a Presidential election, based on research in Erie County, Ohio, in 1944.

Seldes, Gilbert. *The Great Audience*. New York: Viking Press, 1950.

A readable and penetrating critique of the "lively arts," movies, TV, and radio.

Svirsky, Leon, Editor. *Your Newspaper: Blueprint for a Better Press*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1947.

A critical study of the American newspaper by nine journalists who were studying on Nieman Fellowships at Harvard University.

White, Llewellyn. *The American Radio*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947.

A comprehensive and fully-documented critique of the American broadcasting industry, issued by the Commission on Freedom of the Press.

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